

6 The End of *Flânerie*: iPods, Aesthetics, and Urban Experience

Michael Bull

The use of mobile communication technologies has become integral to our cultural and urban universe—a technology-mediated universe in which an increasing amount of our experience is channeled through a wide array of consumer technologies saturating both public and private spaces (McCarthy 2001). The impact that these technologies have on the fabric of everyday urban life is complex and multifaceted both structurally and individually. This chapter focuses primarily on the aesthetic nature of this influence by examining the use of the first consumer cultural icon of the twenty-first century—the Apple iPod.

The aesthetic construction of urban experience has frequently been viewed through a visually based epistemology in which the figure of the flaneur looms large. The flaneur is thought to re-create the cinematic nature of experience transposed onto the street. The habitual consumption of film and television is thought to feed into how city dwellers might re-create their daily experience in the city street (Morse 1998). In contrast to this primarily visual understanding of urban experience, I investigate the nature of an *audiovisual* aestheticization of the city undertaken by iPod users and in doing so place sound at the heart of everyday aesthetics. I examine and question the nature of the urban aesthetic through the supplementing of vision by sound.

The use of MP3 technologies has become commonplace in the city, with more than 50 percent of the citizens of the industrialized West possessing the ability to create their own privatized and privatizing auditory bubbles as they habitually move through the city.¹ My analysis draws upon primary data collected from more than one thousand iPod users worldwide.² It questions the relevance of contemporary understandings of the flaneur as an explanatory tool for the aesthetic practices of iPod users and simultaneously dismisses alternative critiques of *flânerie* based on a range of premises, which attribute the modern nature of cities, their architecture, and how we move through it as symbolizing the end of *flânerie* (Young 2006). In effect, both views are wrong. I critique both the proponents of *flânerie* and their critics—replacing them with an empirically grounded analysis that furthers our understanding

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of contemporary forms of mobile, technologically mediated forms of urban aesthetics. To be clear, I am not stating that no such thing as *flânerie* exists in contemporary urban culture; forms of *flânerie* might exist in the appropriation of artistic databases or in the appropriation of dominant landmarks and their attendant artistic installations.³ Rather, I am claiming that it is not a useful concept through which to understand the daily experience of millions of iPod users.

***Flânerie* and iPod Use**

Technology has come to the aid of the senses, enhancing and diminishing them, reconfiguring them and empowering them. It was Walter Benjamin (1973) who first alerted us to the transformative power of film on human cognition as, indeed, it was his writings that reintroduced the concept of the flaneur into mainstream cultural and urban studies. The placing of earphones over (or in) the ears, an intrinsic element of iPod use, transforms the historical adage that the ears are the most democratic of the senses, democratic precisely because of their passivity in the face of the auditory. The science-fiction writer William Gibson captured in his description of the first mobile auditory technology the intensity of this auditory “privatization”: “The Sony Walkman has done more to change human perception than any virtual reality gadget. I can’t remember any technological experience since that was quite so wonderful as being able to take music and move it through landscapes and architecture” (1993, 49). iPod users differ from Walkman users in the users’ ability to carry around their whole musical collection with them in the form of dedicated playlists or through the random workings of the machine’s shuffle capacity. It is in this ability to micro-manage the relationship between mediated audition, space, place, and cognition that a more “listening” self develops to distinguish iPod users from Walkman users (Bull 2007).

Linearism as a mode of urban appropriation is representative of the dominance of the visual in urban and cultural studies (Amin and Thrift 2002; Friedberg 1993; Jenks 1995a; Tester 1994; Tonkiss 2005). The flaneur in this literature is understood as a rootless, displaced subject who places herself in the shoes of the “other”—imagining what the world would be like from the position of the other. *Flânerie* is an act of alienated integration representing a quest to understand the other, albeit in imaginary terms, and is “characterized by its very receptive disposition, a mode of embracing rather than of excluding external impulses” (Gleber 1999, 26). Benjamin also understood the flaneur as representing the image of the outsider, yet in contemporary rhetoric the term *flânerie* has become universalized—we all become flaneurs in a sanitized image of urban relations in which *flânerie* is an integral part of the “tourist” gaze (Urry 2000). Integral to an understanding of contemporary *flânerie* is that the city is

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understood in some sense as “filmic,” that our media experience in the home is reproduced in our apprehension of the urban street: “As a social and textual construct of mobile visibility, *flânerie* can be historically situated as an urban phenomenon linked in gradual ways to the new aesthetic of reception found in ‘movie-going.’ . . . [A]n increased centrality of the mobile gaze [is] a fundamental feature of everyday life” (Friedberg 1993, 3).

The visual aesthetic embodied in the contemporary gaze is asserted in terms of its empirical veracity and as a conceptual tool through which to understand the nature of our appropriation of the city: “The *flâneur*, though grounded in everyday life, is an analytical form, a narrative device, an attitude towards knowledge and its social context. It is an image of movement through the social space of modernity” (Jenks 1995b, 146).

In its aesthetic appropriation of urban space, flaneurism is understood as both pleasurable and inconsequential: “The technology of aesthetic spacing makes the eye into the primary aperture through which the pleasures the crowded space has to offer can be taken in. . . . The beauty of ‘aesthetic control’—the unclouded beauty, beauty unspoiled by the fear of danger, guilty conscience or apprehension of shame—is its inconsequentiality” (Bauman 1993, 168).

The city thus becomes a stimulating, enticing, and rich force—a place of difference in which the subject’s emotional and cognitive engagement with it is characterized by intensity. The flâneur becomes representative of the person for whom movement and aesthetics are fused. This aesthetic colonization of urban space becomes an integral part of an urban tale whereby experience is synonymous with technological experience. This technological structure to experience is both pervasive and increasingly taken for granted in wide areas of daily life. The age of mechanical reproduction is the age of mediation—from the birth of the telegraph to the most recent developments of ubiquitous computing articulated in the present volume—wherein mediated experience is quickly becoming “second nature” to many. This pervasiveness is simultaneously empowering and dependent for contemporary consumers inasmuch as they tend to be operationalized only through communication technologies (Bull 2000, 2007). For the iPod user, the aesthetic re-creation of her environment is invariably associated with intense, privatized music reception. The use of earpieces placed directly into the ears connects the user with her environment, integrating and assimilating her into the world, yet in a transcendent manner whereby her everyday experience is transformed through the medium of sound. In doing so, urban space undergoes a reenchantment precisely through the sonic sounds of the culture industry (Horkheimer and Adorno 1973). In chapter 7 of this volume, Torben Sangild discusses the atmospheric nature of sonic places and the way in which they interact with the experiencing subject. iPod users implicitly deny the “objective” nature of any soundworld

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by re-creating it as their own. In creating a hermetically sealed mobile bubble of sound whose characteristics might be represented in terms of a saturation of the users' soundworld, both immediate and intense, iPod users appear on the face of it useful candidates for contemporary flaneurism inasmuch as the aestheticizing potential of this "totalizing" technology permits them to aesthetically re-create their environment at will. Indeed, early accounts of Walkman use often drew upon notions of *flânerie* to explain the technology's aestheticizing potential (Chambers 1994; Hosokawa 1984). Mobile forms of audiovisual experience were thus welded seamlessly to previous accounts of the visually experienced city, reducing the audiovisual to the visual. However, the privatized audiovisual re-creation of urban experience is diametrically opposed to *flânerie*. The audiovisual dimension of experience demands a different explanation than the merely visual.

The Filmic City

iPod users often describe the city in filmic terms, yet this visual aesthetic is not a form of *flânerie*. The world experienced as a movie script in which the user takes command is a common description of iPod users. The world and the users' experience within it gain significance through their enveloping and privatized soundworld. iPod users invariably prefer to listen to their music loud, providing them with an overwhelming sense of presence while simultaneously blocking out any sound from the environment that might sully the heightened and empowering pleasure of use.

The world looks friendlier, happier, and sunnier when I walk down the street with my iPod on. It feels as if I'm in a movie at times. Like my life has a soundtrack now. It also takes away some of the noise of the streets, so that everything around me becomes calmer somewhat. It detaches me from my environment, like I'm an invisible, floating observer. (Berklee)

I find when listening to some music choices I feel like I'm not really there. Like I'm watching everything around me happening in a movie. I start to feel the environment in the sense of the mood of the song and can find that I can start to love a street that I usually hate, or feel scared for no reason. (Susan)

I'll pick music that complements the weather, and that can alter the outlook on the world around me. I can take joy in otherwise gloomy, rainy, dank weather by putting on something wonderfully gloomy and dank, something I love to hear. It's a fine synergy of the visual and auditory environments. It makes me feel like I'm walking through my own movie, with my own soundtrack. The people around me look like extras on the set. I see myself in the third person. (Angie)

The conditioning of the filmic in the creation of a personalized audiovisual aesthetic is prominent in these accounts of iPod use, so it is useful to interpret the dynamic of aesthetic appropriation in some detail. For the most part, users claim that the aesthetic principle tends to be dependent on the use of their iPods. Users will pick

playlists or fast forward to music tracks that suit either their mood or their surroundings. In Berklee's account, the environment is transformed by the music played; indeed, the environment becomes a function of individualized sound. The listener becomes an auditory spectator. Yet, as in Susan's account, the iPod user is also dependent on the music in order to re-create specific moods or images within his urban experience. Angie picks music that will enhance the environment—that suits her mood. It is important to recognize the cognitive strategies being employed here. The world is being aesthetically reproduced in conformity to the user's mood or the mood of the music listened to. iPod users aim to create a privatized sound world that is in harmony with their mood, orientation, and surroundings, enabling them to recapitalize urban experience through a process more akin to solipsistic aestheticization. Rather than reaching out to understand or see the "otherness" of the city as "otherness," they aim to create habitually an aesthetically pleasing urban world for themselves in their own image. This is an intensely pleasurable world; indeed, Benjamin himself described the visually orientated flâneur in terms of the intoxicification of urban experience. Yet the visual might be conceived of in terms of a level of discontinuity—distractions, the opening and shutting of the eyes—leading urban theorists to articulate the modern city in terms of the experience of *Erlebnis*. The audiovisual experience of the urban is more readily understood, however, through the continuity of experience through which the subject attempts to integrate experience into a unified whole—the experience of *Erfahrung*. Joseph Auner discusses the reception of the mechanized voice in terms of the posthuman or fragmentary nature of experience (chapter 5 in this volume), whereas iPod users appear to be more concerned with the integrating and centering of their experience. Theirs is a strategy of bringing the world in line with their cognitive predispositions—indeed, doing so is an act of mimicry. This aesthetic appropriation of urban space is one cognitive strategy operationalized as they attempt to create a seamless web of mediated and privatized experience in their everyday movement through the city, enhancing virtually any chosen experience in any geographical location at will. Aesthetic enhancement is a central strategy taken by iPod users as they bring the city into themselves as a habitable presence. It would be a mistake, however, to understand this appropriation merely in terms of the audiovisual. All media reorient the senses; indeed, the history of the media is one of sensory enhancement and deprivation. iPod users often report, for example, a diminishing of their sense of touch as they weave through the crowded city, which makes this movement more pleasurable. Use might equally become dysfunctional for users if the environment they move through is too loud—meaning that they can hear the sounds of the underground train, for example, or that they are subject to too much interruption by others. The seamlessness of experience is paramount to iPod users.

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Derealized Others

If urban spaces are aestheticized in relation to the users' cognition and music, then what of other people? The city as a place of otherness is one of its defining features (Sennett 1990). How then do iPod users interpret the existence of others?

For some reason, Talking Heads seems to work best for this. Like, I will look at an old woman with a cane, and imagine her singing one lyric. Then move on to a hip-hop style teenage boy, and have him sing the next line. My imagination really can take off. It sometimes makes me laugh and smile to myself—especially if a particularly amusing line comes up. It really does transform my surroundings—I sort of feel like I'm in my own music video. (Karen)

It removes an external layer. I see people and things as inanimate or not-fully-connected. It seems that I have an external connection they lack. It's quite odd, actually. . . . Yes. With the iPod and news talk radio files, I am having an interactive session with the anchor. When I look at the people around me, they appear to be two dimensional and without significance. (Mark)

On my walk to work, I'm leaving downtown and walking across a river into a neighbourhood of small shops and restaurants, so it's quite pleasant. The music helps me feel like I'm leaving dreary downtown and going someplace happy. On my way home, it transforms my path from "the path home" into "the path to whatever I'm going to be doing." Sometimes I'll use it to ignore homeless people, because they're always asking for change, and I carry none. (John)

City life is invariably about surfaces—the superficial reading and the transitory clues involved in our observations of others, hence the overriding dominance of the visual in urban culture. Connectivity—if it occurs—is largely virtual for iPod users. The "personalization" of the user's soundworld imbues the street and others with its own atmosphere in which the world appears intimate and endowed with significance. Karen gives roles out to others while listening to the Talking Heads—the world mimics and moves to the rhythm of the music. Other users refer to the absent-derealized nature of the other as they view them through their own soundworld. For other users, the bright-hued colors of the city enacted through iPod use permit them to neutralize the messy, grimy side of the city that confronts them. Hence, the other is made into the image of the iPod user or neutralized to make the city a habitable space.

Although derealization is a dominant motif of iPod use, it would be a mistake to hypostasize the totality of separation. Not all urban space is devoid of interest or narrative for users. Use might sometimes heighten a user's sense of place—, for instance, in walking by the sea, whereby the physicality and smell of the sea are heightened by the user's chosen music, making her feel—at the very least—more connected to her environment. This connectivity differs from the experience of audiowalks and augmented-reality settings in museums, where users are either focused on the specifics of the activity or are being directed toward certain forms of connectivity, narrative, and histories. I am concerned here more with the mundane everyday life practices of

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aestheticization. It is important to note that the interface between technologies and use is subject to a series of strategic possibilities based on the user's cognitive orientation, the technology itself, and the place-space within which the activity takes place (Bull 2000).

Cosmopolitanism in the iPod

In early discussions of flaneurism, the flaneur was interpreted as integral to the cosmopolitan city. The cosmopolitan image of city life is at least partially a function of life on the street (Simmel 1997). Through interacting with and being open to experience, the urban citizen contributes to the rich fabric of city life. Yet although many iPod users report enjoying city life, theirs is a mediated experience of the pleasures of the city. They frequently view the city through the products of the culture industry in the form of music, talking books, and the iPod itself:

I refer to my iPod as my pace maker, it helps me find that place. I almost exclusively Travel to NYC when not in London. I have a dedicated playlist called "NY State of Mind"[:] this includes a lot of New York rap music and NY/ East coast Jazz. Something With N.Y. in the lyrics, but also the sophistication, edge and energy of the place. (Sami)

It makes NY City feel like a happy place—a place where taxi's don't honk. . . . [A]lso, it Always helps adjust my mood—if I'm listening to John Denver, I am happy go lucky—If it is AC/DC, I'm feeling like a New Yorker. (Susie)

In these examples, the meaning of city spaces itself derives from the user's playlist. Cosmopolitanism becomes a fictional reality existing in the often eclectic mix of music contained in the iPod, in the user's music collection itself. For many iPod users, the pleasure of the city comes not from interacting with others, who would "disrupt" and "distract" their energy, but rather from listening to music that might remind them of what it is to live in a city. This mediated cosmopolitanism is encased in the user's iPod.

Although the audiovisual is dominant in iPod use, it is not a form of *flânerie*; rather, iPod users aim to create a privatized soundworld that is in harmony with their mood, orientation, and surroundings, enabling them to respecialize urban experience through a process of solipsistic aestheticization. They aim to create an aesthetically pleasing urban world for themselves as a constituent part of their everyday life. The aesthetic appropriation of urban space becomes one cognitive strategy as they attempt to create a seamless web of mediated and privatized experience in their everyday movement through the city, enhancing virtually any chosen experience in any geographical location at will. They create an illusion of omnipotence through mediated proximity and "connectedness" engendered by the use of their iPod. Susan Kozel asks how we should exist and move through the world, pointing implicitly to a notion of recognition as

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fundamental to a sense of the “other” (chapter 19 in this volume), and Georgina Born (2011) asks, How can we understand the transformations of auditory media in relation to the modes of experience they afford? Jonathan Sterne has traced the historical technological antecedents to this auditory solipsism (audile technique is based on the listener’s *individuation*), arguing that “the auditory field produced through technicized listening becomes a kind of personal space” (2003, 158). iPod users resemble Christopher Lasch’s “minimal self” in which the user withdraws into a world small enough to exert total control over it. This is not a technological argument, but rather a cultural one; nor is it an argument that pits direct interaction against mediated interaction, but rather one that poses the question as to how shared space is managed and what might be the consequences of this form of mediated solipsism. Forms of urban reciprocity, urban recognition, are habitually denied within iPod use. The empowerment of the subject implies an incipient crises in the way in which users “recognize” the other (Honneth 1995). Although aestheticization has traditionally been viewed as both pleasurable and inconsequential—the world remains untouched by the aesthetic mode—iPod practices highlight its relational quality, which contains cognitive and moral resonances. iPod users’ aestheticizing impulse highlights the users’ underlying values and their relation to the “other” and to the spaces passed through.

Nonspaces, Automobiles, Speed, and iPod Use

Alternative critics of contemporary *flânerie* point to the role that automobiles play in the city, in which the city is no longer a walking city, but a driving or transit one. Large areas of the city are given over to transportation systems, relegating the pedestrian to a bit part of city life. The very nature of driving facilitates against *flânerie* because the driver focuses on merely the road ahead, qualitatively devaluing the journey itself to the instrumental task of arriving at one’s destination (Young 2006). The speed of modern cities is also thought to destroy the conditions for aimless strolling, a key feature of *flânerie*. At best, all that remains are tourist flaneurs on their “three day itineraries” (White 2001, 27). Added to these adverse urban conditions is the very architectural nature of the modern city. Essential to the health of the flaneur, it is argued, is the city’s strangeness and uniqueness. Modern cities, in contrast, are defined by their essential similarity—a bland internationally homogenous architecture—whose coupling with the suburbanization of the city results in the proliferation of nonspaces that work against aestheticization (Auge 1995).

Although dismissing *flânerie* as a largely inappropriate concept through which to understand the aesthetics of the city, at least in the daily experience of iPod users, alternative rejections of *flânerie* based largely on the architectural anonymity of

modern cities, their attendant modes of transportation, and the speed of daily life also misunderstand the aesthetics of iPod users.

The creation of modern cities into increasingly privatized and mobile nodules within which citizens move either in their automobiles or on foot with headphones firmly on might be described in terms of urban chill (Bull 2007). The use of communication technologies such as the iPod and car radios warm up the users' space of habitation as they commune with others (through mobile phones) or the products of the culture industry (through their musical narrative encased within their iPods). Urban chill thus resides in the streets we walk through, the buildings we pass by, the modern shopping centers we are inevitably drawn to, the anonymous spaces of airports, train stations, parking lots, and the endless motorways that many of us progressively live in as we shuttle backward and forward in our cars, on public transport, or on foot. Marc Auge (1995) uses in his analysis of urban space the term *nonspace* to describe an urban culture of semiologically denuded spaces—shopping centers, airports, motorways, and the like. He thinks of these invariably architecturally bland spaces as if they had been dropped onto the urban landscape at random. Who can tell one shopping center from another, for example? From this perspective, urban spaces increasingly function as the endless transit zones of urban culture—emblems of the increasingly mobile nature of urban culture.

However, with iPod use, any urban space can become a nonspace. The defining feature of our relationship to urban space is not necessarily how culturally situated that space might be. For iPod users, any urban space might become a "nonspace"; their relationship with this space is not dependent on the anthropological nature of the space itself, but increasingly on the technologically empowered subjective response to that space or, indeed, on the prior negation of that space through the users' cognitive predilections. Just as the placing of earphones over the ears empowers the ear, so the urban subject is free to re-create the city in his or her own image through the power of sound, as the following iPod user indicates very aptly: "When I plug in and turn on, my iPod does a 'ctrl+alt+delete' on my surroundings and allows me to 'be' somewhere else" (Wes).

iPod users resemble the imaginative city dwellers that aesthetically re-create any chosen space at will. Furthermore, the iPod permits users to control and manage their urban experience, reclaiming the time of the commute, whether it is achieved by traveling on foot, on public transport, or by automobile. In the process, time becomes subjectivized, and speed is brought into the user's rhythm. "I view people more like choices when I'm wearing my iPod. Instead of being forced to interact with them, I get to decide. It's almost liberating to realize you don't have to be polite or smile or do anything. I get to move through time and space at my speed [and] my pace" (Andrea).

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iPod users equally use their iPods in their automobiles as well as in the street, thus further removing them from those on the street, and although drivers tend to focus on the road while driving, they also engage in a wide range of behaviors while doing so. Drivers habitually listen to their iPod or car radios and use their mobile phones while driving. Many drivers are forced to drive in daily gridlock with others to and from work—prisoners in their cars, often forced out of living in the city by the cost or in search of space and the domestic and privatized life of the suburbs. Automobile habitation provides the driver with his or her own regulated soundscape. Inside the car, the process of placing oneself elsewhere is similar to the strategies other users employ while walking down the street:

Driving in the countryside of Indiana does not quite take as much concentration as driving through the rush hour traffic in London. I usually set my car on “cruise control” and just keep an eye on the traffic in front of me (which is not too heavy here in Indiana). The songs transform me to all kind of places in my life. . . . And that is what I love about the “shuffle” feature. Whenever a “childhood” song comes on, I “feel” like I am back in my parents’ house. Then a track from an Australian band might bring me back to the 2 years I have spent in Sydney. I sometimes don’t even remember that I have passed certain “points” on my drive from or to work. This thing is a wonderful “time machine” and is better than any diary. (Jerome)

The nostalgic use of music to place the subject elsewhere is merely one use of the iPod in the car. Drivers tend to reclaim space by privatizing it. The aural space of the automobile becomes a safe, pleasurable, and intimate environment. The structural nature of contemporary cities—with their traffic, global architecture, and swift rhythms—is managed through communication technologies such as the iPod, enabling users to bring under control, at least cognitively, what it means to live in the city. Mediated forms of aestheticization are central to these user strategies.

Sound both colonizes the listener and actively re-creates and reconfigures the spaces of experience. Through the power of a privatized soundworld, the world becomes intimate, known, and possessed. Imagination is mediated by the sounds of the iPod, which become an essential component of the ability to imagine at all. iPod users construct an aesthetic narrative to the city deciphered from the sounds of the culture industry emanating from their iPods. In doing so, they become the center of their world: “The world looks smaller—I am much bigger and more powerful listening to music. The world is generally a better place, or at the very least it is sympathetic to my mood” (Sophie).

The world is brought into line through a privatized yet mediated act of cognition. Yet aestheticization has utopian implications for users. To aestheticize is to transcend the mundane world as it is experienced. Aestheticization remains an active mode of appropriating the urban, transforming that which exists, making it the user’s own. In this process of aestheticization, iPod users transform the world in conformity with their predispositions; the world becomes a mimetic fantasy in which its “otherness”

in various guises is negated. Space itself becomes technologized; experience becomes real through technological appropriation—or hyper-real precisely through its technologization. iPod users prefer to live in this technologized space whereby experience is brought under control. The twenty-first-century city is the space of the iPod user, not the flâneur.

Notes

1. The majority of these users possess mobile phones with MP3 capability. Jean Baudrillard was ahead of his time in stating that “to each his own bubble; that is the law today” (1993, 39). The predisposition to privatize one's experience while on the move is prefigured by the development of the automobile (Sachs 1992).
2. For details, refer to Bull 2007.
3. See, for instance, Delphine Benezet's (2009) analysis of how visitors understood an historical database of Los Angeles from 1920 to 1986 and Devin Zuber's (2006) analysis of the artworks surrounding Ground Zero.

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